

The Tonic of Southern Folklore

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DIVERSITY in union and a regionalism that no longer transcends nationalism are among the exhaustless delights of America. If surveys of the folklore of New England and of the Old South differed from similar books about other parts of the United States it would be, of course, in the depth of the background. Among Southern states, for example, some of the distinctive qualities that have shaped folklore have been the British stock, the presence of the Negro almost everywhere, the persistence of the Confederate tradition, the dominance of staple agriculture, and a climate that supplies outdoor themes for stories more appropriately told under a shade tree than from a chimney corner.

British blood has given homogeneity to the white population and has assured the same outlook on life, within the bracket of the variations of individual peculiarities. A story-teller may have a feeble charge in his gun but he may be sure that, such as it is, it will not miss fire. So certain is this that one hears the echo of the same laugh to an ancestral yarn that has been carried from one state to another and has been given local dress wherever migration has halted. Some salty observations that were old in England when brought to Jamestown in the 1600's are heard with a chuckle even now and are credited to some Texan whose grandfather carried them with him from Virginia via Tennessee. In contrast, German, Jewish, and even Irish jests seldom are heard in the South.

The pervasive presence of the Negro has sharpened the humor of men of British stock precisely as it has softened their speech. This has been a process of long continuance and of large influence. A British visitor complained in 1746 that Virginia parents would

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"suffer" their children, when young, "to prowl among the young Negroes, which insensibly causes them to imbibe their manners and broken speech." Any traveler of two centuries later could say the same thing, with the added observation that Southerners cherish so much affection for a language with no terminal g's that they have ceased to care whether the elisions were originally theirs or the Negroes'. If the Negroes are grateful for their advancement in the South, they may assert that they have recompensed their teachers; and if the Negroes wished to avenge themselves for their bondage, they could say they had made their masters their captives in music, in mimicry, in humor, and in laughter. There was a period—it has not yet ended in some parts of the South—when certain of the Negro leaders regarded their people's music as an echo of slavery, and their happy nature as reconciliation to inferiority. May they never prevail on the Negro to abandon his spirituals or to stifle his innate humor! A nation that has had the curse of two world wars in a single generation needs the solace of song and the tonic of laughter.

For close to two generations, the war of 1861-65 was the great fact in Southern life. Conversation of the elders gravitated to the heroes and the horrors of that conflict. The inexhaustible theme of argument was responsibility for the Confederate failure—it never was called the Confederate defeat—at Gettysburg. Second only to this was the question: Would Sherman ever have succeeded in marching to the Sea if Joe Johnston had not been relieved of command in front of Atlanta? It was much more a matter of parental duty to see that a son knew the Southern estimates of casualties in the principal battles than that he remembered with precision the provoking difference between seven times eight and nine times six. All constitutional questions were relatively unimportant in comparison with that of the right of secession. The thump of the wooden leg of a Confederate office-seeker on the wooden platform erected for "speaking on court day" was more eloquent than any speech a rival could spin out to the inevitable peroration on Southern womanhood.

The four gradations of assured damnation were those of atheist, "nigger-lover," Republican and, in the very pit, Confederate deserter. Privately, individual Confederates might admit that such and

such a veteran had told the same lie so often that he believed it, but if any Yankee disputed it, then a comrade most certainly had to be defended. All this, of course, became the very web and woof of folklore. The first surprise in analyzing the effect of the glorification of the Confederacy is that so much sound historical writing was done almost from 1865, in complete independence of fanciful tales fervently retold and generally credited. Second among the surprises is the fact that out of so convulsing, so overwhelming a tragedy there came so little good poetry. No satisfactory explanation of this ever has been given. Thomas Nelson Page and Mary Johnston and Margaret Mitchell wrung dry the romance of the Confederacy as a theme of fiction. Until the appearance of *John Brown's Body* in 1928, even the most ardent Confederate would have been hard hit to pick out any single poem on battles or leaders or death or victory, and to have said, "This is first class."

The cotton and the corn, the marshes of Glynn and the red hills of Georgia are the natural, indeed the ideal, setting for the development of a folklore in which the planter, the preacher, the politician, the "poor white," and the Negro are the central figures. A kindly climate did the rest. Uncle Remus never would have understood what "Br'er Fox" was saying if the old man had lived where he had to wear ear muffs. All this doubtless is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the folklore and of the music of every country.

On the stage thus set, heroes hold first place. Perhaps every land that has the tradition of a Lost Cause builds its monuments in a certain sentimental determination and seeks through its memorials both to exemplify and to perpetuate its ideal. There is much truth in the dictum, "Show me a people's monuments and I will tell you what manner of men they are." The South was in the 1870's "a land of tombs"; by 1900, obelisks rose above the graves, and Confederate monuments stood in many a rural courthouse village. Sons and daughters may not retain their parents' belief that certain of these figures are as fine as Michelangelo's David, and that every bronze rider deserves as much aesthetic reverence as the Colleoni, because the sculptors were Confederate veterans or, at the least, men of local origin. If today a certain reticence is observable when the pose of the county's marble Confederate defender is questioned, there is

no wane whatsoever in the devotion of Southerners to their heroes. Exact knowledge of Confederate campaigns and commanders has yielded to the vagueness that covers nearly the whole of American history, but Lee and Jackson and Forrest and Beauregard have become the symbols of what Southern men ought to revere. This holds true even if some of these demigods have been portrayed as so flawless that a youngster despairs of emulating them.

In sharpest contrast is an older form of hero worship in Southern folklore. This is not regional. Perhaps one would not be stretching a thesis if one said the hero of the fireside and of the shade tree is not American, or even Aryan, but primal. Specialists may dispute origins, precisely as Mark Twain explored what he termed the geology of jokes. When all the variants of the "golden bough" have been classified, and when even Sir James George Frazer's resourcefulness has been worn to the last title of the final reissue of his books, are there more than two elemental qualities in the basic folklore of man? Are not those two strength and cunning? Say what you will, Jack is the great-grandfather of all the folk heroes; his beanstalk is the symbol of his prowess, the antecedent of David's sling and Arthur's Excalibur and all the weapons of all the great warriors. George Washington may be, after a thousand years, the legendary hero of America. At least, no man yet born on this continent seems to have so good a prospect of that form of immortality. If it should so eventuate, the Washington of folklore will not be the patient general who held together a demoralized army, but the young man who breasted the ice-laden Allegheny; not the bold designer of the campaign of Trenton and Princeton, but the boy who was credited with throwing a dollar across the Rappahannock. It will matter not the least that no silver dollar circulated widely among the American Colonials in Washington's youth, and that if it had, he was so acquisitive that he probably would have been the last young resident of the Rappahannock Valley to throw a coin away. This story is the ideal raw material of folklore and, as such, has its place in such folklore. Probably the tale of the dollar will outlive that of the cherry tree because, it is submitted, strength was admired before moral virtue was. As for cunning, the other primal quality that found its way into the stories the sire told the grandson in the cave,

the adjective connotes Ulysses, but that Ithacan, son of Laërtes, was of an ancestry lost in the earliest tales of China and of India. In Joel Chandler Harris' delightful tales and in all the other folk yarns about foxes, have we a transference to the animal of the admired cunning of man; or was man first likened to the fox because the exceptional human learned the way of Reynard?

What may be said of the style of story-telling in the South? Was it as good as the raw materials from which it was made? Did it have the rich colors of the background? Few will give an unqualified affirmative answer. There were artists in narration, but art no more was universal in this than in any other form of human endeavor. Herein is disappointment, because in the rural South there was time enough for perfecting any embellishment the narrator devised. Some men who loved tall tales made the most of clocks that ticked slowly. It was suspected of at least one famous Southern raconteur, for example, that he set down on paper the best of his stories, word by word, and that what appeared to be unconscious adornment and a happy, instant fashioning of metaphor was actually studied declamation from a much-revised manuscript. That may have been slander of a gentleman whose verbal bait seldom failed of takers, but the regrettable fact stands: Storytelling was not so artful as it should have been. It was too long-winded, and it had too much of the echo of the political platform. Spontaneity was lost in the polishing of paragraphs.

Southern oratory drew heavily on folklore and perhaps contributed to it, but, in general, speechmaking had much the same faults as storytelling. Whether in the pulpit, striving for the souls of men, or in the courtyard, seeking votes, the orator of the early nineteenth century echoed the style of a romantic age of literature. He was apt to be verbose and over-ornate—to walk around a subject just as, on occasion, he wound his way around the platform, lest the auditors on the left conclude that they were not receiving as much attention as their brethren on the speaker's right. If out of this there have come legends of audiences swept into the deep seas of emotional storm by the eloquence of some "forest-born Demosthenes," some frontier John the Baptist, it is entirely probable that the man most responsible is one now almost forgotten—William

Wirt of Virginia. He was attorney general of the United States for twelve years, was himself a speaker of much charm, and was the author, among other works, of *The Letters of the British Spy* (1803) and of the first detailed biography of Patrick Henry (1817). The supposed experiences of the spy included a halt at a church where a blind preacher, an authentic person of standing, James Waddel, was describing the crucifixion. Wirt's account of the minister's sermon was itself a remarkable piece of writing. As it appeared in a book quite widely circulated, it inspired many to imitate James Waddel. If students catch now and again the echo of stories of some great, unappreciated orator of the backwoods, it is quite likely that the tale originated in the pages of William Wirt. He certainly was responsible not only for the supposed form of Patrick Henry's speech on the arming of Virginia in 1775, but also—and chiefly through that utterance—Wirt influenced for two generations the approved style of rotund Southern oratory.

Henry's peroration on "Give me liberty or give me death" probably has some title to authenticity. As much may be said of a few other sentences in the speech that schoolboys still "learn by heart." For the remainder of the deliverance, there is no authority beyond hearsay and old men's remembrance of youthful impressions. The speech, in the judgment of some, is one-tenth Henry and nine-tenths Wirt, but it was accepted as one hundred per cent the model of what an oration ought to be, and it was imitated endlessly and stylistically. The politician who aspired to be heir to Henry's eloquence was supposed to take off somewhere in the vicinity of the bottom C of the bass clef, to soar at least as high as F of the treble, to drop then abruptly a full octave, and to twist to finality at any elevation he chose. This was known among fledgling orators as "curling," and it was all in all a most extraordinary, not to say a perplexing, device. Wirt assuredly ought not to be held responsible for this style of delivery, but insofar as he shaped a tradition, it is to be noted that he did not issue his life of Henry until almost the time of the Missouri Compromise.

Thus have we Americans, in Henry's supposed speech, a bit of developing folklore of an age not yet much more than a century and a third. That is by no means the latest example. What could be

more completely in the mode of folktale than the familiar remark that it "was worth traveling all the way across the State just to hear William L. Yancey pronounce the word 'Alabama' "? Still again, witness the manner in which "The Wreck of Old Ninety-Seven" already has become a regional possession. Recent or remote, African or Aryan, the existing general pattern of Southern folklore probably was set in late "slave days" and during the Reconstruction. This is understandable. Behind the songs and the stories often were inextinguishable humor, zeal, faith and acceptance, in a spirit almost Hellenic, of the adversity man could not escape—a state of mind the South needed when her cities were ashes and her sons were slain. There is some dark laughter in Southern folklore; there is superstition, too; but there is manhood and mirth and cheer for dark nights.